

Jelena
Maksimović,
Ph.D.

Faculty of
Philosophy
University of Niš

RESEARCHER-PRACTITIONER'S ROLE IN ACTION RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

The role of teachers as action researchers is still undervalued and not sufficiently encouraged at the faculties of pedagogy and in expert education of in-service teachers. In Serbia, teachers are mostly seen as mediators or technicians whose task is preparation for and conduct of teaching practice based on the instructions developed by external experts. Teachers, therefore, acquire the role of craftsmen rather than professionals and creators. Action research enables teachers, along with other participants in the educational process (students, parents), to initiate changes in order to improve educational practice and self-emancipation. Encouraging teachers to conduct action research could lead to permanent teacher education, changes in schools, professionalization of the teaching vocation and interconnectedness of the theory and practice. The research presented shows that, statistically, the majority of participants believe that the most important role of the teacher in action research in schools is that of the researcher (34.62%), whereas the lowest number of participants opted for the role of the observer (1.54%), which reveals that the teachers are aware of importance of assuming the role of practitioners and researchers of the educational practice.

Keywords: action research, teachers, researcher-practitioner, expert education

VLOGA RAZISKOVALCA PRAKTIKA V AKCIJSKEM RAZISKOVANJU – POVZETEK

Raziskovalna vloga učiteljev v akcijskem raziskovanju je na pedagoških fakultetah in v podiplomskem (ekspertnem) izobraževanju že delujočih učiteljev še vedno premalo cenjena in vzpodbujana. V Srbiji vidijo učitelje še vedno pretežno kot posrednike in tehnike, katerih naloga je priprava in vodenje pouka po napotkih izvedencev, ki delujejo zunaj šolskih ustanov. Tako je učiteljem dodeljena bolj vloga obrtnika kot strokovnjaka in ustvarjalca. Akcijsko raziskovanje omogoča učiteljem skupaj z drugimi udeleženci v vzgojnem procesu (učenci, starši) uvajati v šolah spremembe za izboljšanje izobraževalne prakse in lasten razvoj. Spodbujanje učiteljev k akcijskemu raziskovanju lahko vodi v permanentno izobraževanje učiteljev, k spremembam v šolah, k profesionalizaciji učiteljskega poklica in v povezanost teorije s prakso. Pričujoča raziskava kaže, da statistična večina udeležencev vidi raziskovanje kot najpomembnejšo vlogo učitelja v akcijskem raziskovanju v šolah (34,62 odstotka), medtem kot se je najmanjše število udeležencev odločilo za vlogo opazovalca (1,54 odstotka). To izpričuje, da se učitelji zavedajo, kako pomembno je prevzeti vlogo praktika raziskovalca izobraževalne prakse.

Ključne besede: akcijsko raziskovanje, učitelji, raziskovalec praktik, podiplomsko (ekspertno) izobraževanje

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The essential characteristic of action research is that it aims at solving specific problems practitioners encounter in their daily practice, which means improving educational practice. The aims of action research are changing and are bringing a new quality to the educational practice: this kind of research is conducted in real situations with the involvement of all participants in all research phases. The main purpose of action research is establishing some qualitative facts and understanding in-

dividual pedagogical phenomena in order to change, improve or solve concrete problems of educational practice. The logical foundation of such research is phenomenology, and one of its important characteristics is that the phenomena are not neutral in terms of values and that they should be viewed as a whole (a holistic approach). The research starts from dialectical and constructivist epistemology. The emphasis is on the pedagogical understanding of the phenomena, rather than on

scientific interpretation. Action research proceeds as a spiral cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection.

Action research may become an important instrument for improvement of educational practice, provided it is acknowledged and encouraged within the entire school system. As long as it relies only on the enthusiasm of individual teachers and expert assistants, its application and influence will remain relatively insignificant. Teachers are the agents who should demonstrate their ability to conduct action research in their practice, so that its importance could be recognized and understood outside school.

The basis of modern society is learning, so the teacher should not be merely a craftsman acting on other people's ideas, but a creative, reflective, critically-oriented professional, a teacher-action-researcher, whereas the school should be a place of learning for both children and adults (Freire, 1993; Stoll & Fink, 2000). A researcher is expected to consciously alter the conditions of research, since its main purpose is not interpreting reality but changing it. The researcher thus stops being a neutral expert with regard to values and becomes a fully engaged participant acting in order to bring about the desired changes. This entails a change in the attitude between research subjects and objects: the subject-object relationship is replaced by the subject-subject relationship. All research participants become equal partners who wish to bring about the desired changes through their actions.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In contemporary, change-oriented schools, teachers can no longer be merely beneficiaries of research findings made by professional

researchers working in academic institutions and research centers, but should be actively involved in research processes. By assuming a more active role in school research, teachers become reflective practitioners (Schön, 1984), teacher-researchers or action researchers (McNiff, 2002). The research conducted in school populations should be oriented towards an evaluation of the educational process results, with the aim of improving quality of educational practice. Not only does action research serve these goals, it also addresses the teachers' needs. In the process of action research teachers can solve specific problems, thus improving their practices in accordance with the autonomously-set goals. Action is the core of action research; the collected data serve as the feedback on the basis of which the planned activities can be adjusted and modified. In this way the entire research process becomes a flexible and creative response to the participants' needs. Action research requires internal motivation of those who conduct it. It is equally important that the need for this demanding professional role is felt in schools. In this process researchers research their own practice in cooperation with other participants, who are also potential researchers (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002: 15). However, McNiff, Whitehead and Lomax (1996: 30) believe that changes in educational practice should be made gradually and that improvement can be achieved only if it is not hindered by organizational limitations.

Action research enables solving specific problems encountered in practice; and thus means improvement of practices. While all pedagogical research aims at improving educational practice, action research is special since the problems are identified and solved by teacher-practitioners themselves, and not by professional researchers. Action research derives from the needs of teacher-practitioners and not from the ideas of individuals or

institutions outside school. Carr and Kemmis (1986: 165) claim that action research aims at achieving improvements in three areas: in (1) practice improvement, in (2) practice improvement understanding by teacher-practitioners, and in (3) improvement of the situation in which practice is conducted. People involved in practice are included in the action research process in all phases: planning, action, observation and reflection. However, action research is, unlike other research approaches, closest to the modern notion of practice, in which there is a unity and mutual interconnectedness and codependence of basic characteristics: *tehne – poiesis – praxis – theoria – time* (Kangrga, 1984: 23).

The role of action research in the improvement of educational practice consists of a well thought-out vision, followed up by establishment of a research problem. Whitehead (2004: 42) suggests that we should first identify the values neglected in practice and then ask the question: “How can I improve my practice?” He believes that it is more important to find a way to move forward than to admit one’s failure. The most important thing in action research is to initiate it, because waiting for everything to become clear is the best way not to do anything. In this type of research, it is essential to be prepared for all difficulties as well as to take personal responsibility for all group processes. Fullan (2000), however, states that changes in schools and an improvement of educational practices depend on the following aspects:

- Internal potentials for changes in schools depend on teachers and administrators, who form professional learning communities and develop action plans in order to change their practices and achieve better results. It means that teachers should be trained to monitor and assess the results of their actions in order to be successful.

Each school should work design its developmental model for accomplishing the process of changing and improving educational practice. The process of internal changes is accomplished through cultural restructuring and changes, which will be further discussed in later sections.

- Schools should respond appropriately to the challenge of strong external threats, turning them into their advantages. Parents, local communities, technology, interconnectedness with the economy, governing politics and the development of the teaching profession are important factors in this process, and will be discussed later.
- School-unrelated factors should also be geared to help in accomplishing the previously enumerated aspects through decentralization, strengthening of local capacities and stimulation of innovations.

Despite the fact that in the academic circles action research is widely acknowledged as highly influential in the development of pedagogical sciences, it is still underused in everyday teachers’ practice. The reasons may be found among the following:

- Teachers, and especially those studying to become teachers, are relatively unacquainted with the specificities and the possibilities for conducting action research.
- Teaching professionals are not expected to conduct research – it is merely unpaid extra work for them.
- Those who decide to do research (e.g. as a part of their post-graduate or doctoral studies) generally do not receive any support in schools.
- The long-lasting practice with teachers merely implementing the changes devised outside the school context cannot generate a creative atmosphere, a necessary precondition for action research.

Expert education is a process which aims to improve those teachers' skills and competencies that are necessary for achievement of outstanding educational students' results (Hassel, 1999). If educational practice is to be improved, it is necessary to change the methods of expert education. It is very difficult to change schools unless teachers change their everyday practice. Naturally, when schools do change, there will always be teachers who do not follow the process of change.

In order to discuss teachers' expert education with the purpose of improving educational practice, it is first necessary to explain two terms. The dominant concepts in professional education are: *teacher training* and *teacher education*. The *teacher training* concept is based on the idea that the teaching profession can be understood as a set of skills a student can master through micro-teaching. The results of contemporary research, however, show that teaching is a highly complex activity, a process that cannot be easily predicted; accordingly, the teacher's role has been redefined as that of the practitioner who is expected to make decisions based on reasoning and knowledge. This has made an important impact on teachers' professional education. The concept of *teacher education* has developed with the purpose of educating teachers as competent and autonomous professionals.

Moore (in Stoll & Fink, 2000: 206–207) offers some guidelines for teacher education. She believes that the following preconditions should be met in teacher education:

- cooperation – participants should be included in needs identification, in decision-making, in devising, in implementing and evaluating teachers' development;
- providing help for those who are learning how to determine their own direction

and personal goals - through a choice of professional topics that will satisfy their needs;

- using teacher-learners' experiences as a possible starting point;
- encouraging participation so that teacher-learners can choose their teaching methods and structure their learning process;
- encouraging critical, reflective thinking in order to help teacher-learners examine cultural and organizational hypotheses as well as their own practices;
- encouraging action learning, with the possibility to make decisions regarding teacher-learners' actual problems.

Permanent expert teacher education has been adequately dealt with in pedagogical literature. It abounds with expert studies, discussions and articles. Pedagogical and social significance of the issue has been emphasized on more than one occasion and in numerous situations. Twenty years ago, a law on permanent expert teacher education was adopted in Serbia; however, it was deficient since it did not address the problem of teachers' improvement, which was actually the main issue.

It is important to state that there is no single way in expert education. Craft (2000:10–11) cites the following types of expert education found in contemporary teaching practices:

- action research,
- teaching studies within post-graduate and specialist studies,
- using long-distance learning materials,
- expert education in schools,
- network cooperation,
- participating in working or project groups (professional study groups),
- teaching practice at work or in other schools,
- personal reflection,
- cooperative learning,

- learning via modern information technologies.

Action research is intended to help teachers improve their teaching practices when they work with a specific group of students. It aims at helping teachers deal with both everyday problems and projects introducing innovations. As the understanding of the schooling system has developed, action research has acquired new goals: curriculum development based on the school, teacher professional education strategy, constituent development planning for the school system reforms. All of these contribute to profes-

sionalization of the teaching profession and introduction of the teacher as a researcher. In order to fulfill the vision of teachers' lifelong education, learning and professional development, it is necessary to educate teachers who can think critically, who are able to reflect and evaluate, who

can define and or meet the conditions for successful development of each individual student and who can encourage and improve their own educational practice.

Our previous discussion has shown that action research can be used in teachers' expert education since it has the following advantages:

- it is related to practical problems,
- its cooperative nature makes it suitable for work in smaller groups, in which each participant can take the initiative,
- it stimulates innovative solutions,
- it can be conducted with minimal costs,
- it instigates cooperation and team work (Bunning, 1995).

Despite the rapid development of technology, teachers are still the key factor in high-quality

education, and teachers' expert education affects the quality of education and changes in the professional teaching practices.

THE METHOD

The subject of this research study is the role of the teacher in action research conducted in schools. Its aim is to motivate teachers for action research, which would affect their training in action research with the purpose of improving the educational practice. The main tasks of this research are as follows: (1) to examine the role of teachers in conducting action research in relation to the length of their service; (2) to examine the role of teachers in conducting action research in relation to the school environment; (3) to examine the role of teachers in conducting action research in relation to their study duration; and (4) to examine the role of teachers in conducting action research in relation to the average grade during their studies.

Research variables are: (1) the length of service (four categories: 0–5, 6–20, 20–30 and over 30 years of service), (2) individual study duration, (3) the average grade during the studies. This research is part of a larger-scale research of the role of action research in the educational practice improvement. We used the descriptive method, together with the survey technique and a questionnaire for teachers (UPN).

The research was conducted on a sample of 390 elementary-school 1st-4th-grade teachers with university education. The method of random sampling was used to select the schools in which the research was conducted. The sample included 1st-4th-grade teachers from the territories of Vojvodina (Novi Sad, Subotica and Sombor), central Serbia

Action research is intended to help teachers improve their teaching practices

(Belgrade, Kragujevac and Užice) and southern Serbia (Niš, Leskovac and Vranje).

The characteristics of the sample were as follows:

The teacher-participants' group was not homogenous in terms of the length of service, as is shown by the χ^2 test parameters ($\chi^2=7.85$, $p<0.05$, $\Delta f=2$). The majority of participants (43.08%), which represents almost two thirds of the participants, had 10 to 20 years of service. This group was stronger than both the group of teachers with 10 or less years of service and that of teachers with more than 20 years of service.

The group of teacher-participants was not homogenous in terms of the locations of the schools in which they work ($\chi^2=31.88$, $p<0.001$, $\Delta f=2$). More than half of the participants (53.33%) came from urban schools and statistically fewer teachers from suburban or rural environments.

Table 1: Sample structure in terms of length of service, duration of studying and the average grade during studies

	N	X	SD	CV
Length of service	390	1.99	0.76	37.87
Study duration (in years)	390	5.49	1.02	18.56
Average grade during studies	390	7.59	0.56	7.37

The average study duration was 5.49 ± 1.02 , and the average grade was 7.59 ± 0.56 . Both continual variables make the sample homogenous, as shown by variation quotients of 18.56 and 7.37 respectively.

The research was conducted in 2010.

RESULTS ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

A part of this research was motivated by the incessant debate on the (un)readiness of teacher-practitioners to examine their educational practice, and thus contribute to its improvement, and on whether the teachers' are merely interpreters of the results of practical research done by somebody else. The analysis of participants' views of the role of the teacher in action research conducted in schools (in relation to the length of service, their study duration and the their average grade studies) provided the results which will be presented later in this paper.

Statistically, the majority of participants (34.62%) designated the role of the researcher as the most important teacher's role in action research. In terms of statistics, significantly more participants opted for this answer than for any other answer ($p<0.001$). The other two most often selected roles – those of the educator and the mediator (20.26%) and the coordinator (18.97%) were statistically more significant ($p<0.001$) than the other answers selected: the evaluator (4.87%), the guide (8.21%), the critical friend (6.67%), the observer (4.87%). The fewest participants opted for the role of the interviewee (six, i.e. 1.54%), which testifies to the teachers' awareness of the need to assume the role of the practitioner and researcher of the educational practice.

The obtained value of $\chi^2=81.87$ with limiting chi-square values of 23.685 and 29.141 for the corresponding degree of freedom $\Delta f=14$ for the 0.05 and 0.01 significance levels shows that there are statistically significant differences in the choices of the teacher's role in action research in relation to the length of service. The correlation quotient $C=0.42$ reveals medium-intensive interconnectedness and moderate correlation.

Table 2: Participants' answers regarding the teacher's role in action research conducted in schools in relation to the length of service

Teacher's role	Length of service					
	Up to 10 yrs.		10 to 20 yrs.		Over 20 yrs.	
coordinator	12	10.71%	43	25.60%	19	17.27%
guide	10	8.93%	13	7.74%	9	8.18%
critical friend	9	8.04%	7	4.17%	10	9.09%
observer	0	0.00%	10	5.95%	9	8.18%
researcher	67	59.82%	49	29.17%	19	17.27%
interviewee	0	0.00%	2	1.19%	4	3.64%
educator and mediator	5	4.46%	38	22.62%	36	32.73%
evaluator	9	8.04%	6	3.57%	4	3.64%
Total	112	%	168	%	110	%

$$\chi^2=81.87, p<0.001, \Delta f=14, C=0.42$$

Table 3: Participants' views of the teacher's role in action research conducted in schools in relation to the school environment

Teacher's role	School environment					
	Urban		Rural		Suburban	
coordinator	49	23.56%	14	15.91%	11	11.70%
guide	16	7.69%	7	7.95%	9	9.57%
critical friend	17	8.17%	3	3.41%	6	6.38%
observer	8	3.85%	3	3.41%	8	8.51%
researcher	68	32.69%	36	40.91%	31	32.98%
interviewee	2	0.96%	2	2.27%	2	2.13%
educator and mediator	41	19.71%	18	20.45%	20	21.28%
evaluator	7	3.37%	5	5.68%	7	7.45%
Total	208	%	88	%	94	%

$$\chi^2=15.88, p=0.3209, \Delta f=14, C=0.20$$

The most significant conclusion is that the participants with the shortest length of service opted for the role of the researcher more frequently than for any other role ($p<0.001$); furthermore, this group opted for this role more frequently than the other two groups with longer length of service ($p<0.001$). Participants with 10–20

years of service opted for the role of the researcher (29.17%) more frequently than for the roles of the coordinator (25.60%) and the educator and mediator (22.62%). In the group of teachers with the longest length of service the most frequent choice was the role of the educator and mediator (32.73%), statistically

more significant ($p < 0.01$) than choice of the roles of the coordinator (17.27%) and the researcher (17.27%) as well as any other roles with a minor frequency ($p < 0.001$). The role of the educator and mediator was statistically more significant (32.73%) in participants with the longest length of service in relation to the results obtained from their colleagues with the shortest length of service $p < 0.001$.

Although the contingency table 8×3 and the obtained value for $\chi^2 = 15.88$ with limiting chi-square values of 23.685 and 29.141 for the corresponding degree of freedom $\Delta f = 14$ for 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significance do not show statistically significant differences in the choices of the role of the teacher in action research in relation to the school environment, there are still some interesting points to be made. The participants's first choice was the role of the researcher; there were no significant statistical differences between the participants from various school environments. The correlation quotient $C = 0.20$ points towards weak interconnectedness and low correlation.

What can also be observed, is that the role of the coordinator (23.56%) is a more frequent choice in urban (23.56%) than in rural (15.91%) and suburban (11.70%) environments and statistically more significant than in suburban environment ($p < 0.05$). In the urban environment the role of the researcher has been more frequently chosen than the role of the coordinator ($p < 0.05$), the role of the educator and mediator ($p < 0.01$) and all other roles ($p < 0.001$). In the rural environment the role of the researcher was chosen more frequently than the role of the educator and mediator ($p < 0.01$) or any other role ($p < 0.001$), whereas in the suburban environments the role of the researcher was a more frequent choice than any other role ($p < 0.001$), except the role of the educator and mediator.

It can be concluded that, regardless of the environment in which the teachers work, their opting for the role of the researcher in action research testifies to their engagement, their motivation for changes, their knowledge and the need for improvement of the educational practice.

Table 4: Participants views of the teacher's role in action research conducted in schools in relation to the duration of studying

Teacher's role	n	X	SD	Cv
coordinator	74	5.36	0.75	14.03
guide	32	5.66	0.92	16.26
critical friend	26	5.46	0.77	14.16
observer	19	6.47	1.43	22.07
researcher	135	5.14	1.14	22.20
interviewee	6	6.42	0.20	3.18
educator and mediator	79	5.89	0.73	12.46
evaluator	19	5.26	0.81	15.31
Total	390	5.49	1.02	18.56

One way Anova: $F = 8.78$, $p < 0.001$, $\Delta f = 7$

An analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the obtained value $F = 8.78$ for the corresponding degree of freedom $\Delta f = 7$ make it evident that there is a statistically significant difference in the participants' duration of studying in relation to their opting for different roles in action research. What needs to be pointed out is that the teachers who completed their studies within the nominal study times opted for the role of the researcher statistically more frequently than for the role of the observer ($p < 0.05$) or the role of the educator and mediator ($p < 0.001$). The F-test with Tamhane's post-hoc test for multiple comparisons was used for data analysis and establishment of differences. The participants whose first choice was the role of the observer had the longest study times. It should also be pointed

out that there was a noticeable homogeneity of sub-samples regarding all primary options of the participants, the variance quotient Cv being below 30.

Table 5: Participants views of the teacher's role in action research conducted in schools in relation to the average grade during studies

Teacher's role	n	X	SD	Cv
coordinator	74	7.52	0.39	5.22
guide	32	7.44	0.39	5.18
critical friend	26	7.66	0.35	4.55
observer	19	7.41	0.42	5.62
researcher	135	7.68	0.69	9.03
interviewee	6	7.70	0.24	3.18
educator and mediator	79	7.58	0.60	7.93
evaluator	19	7.64	0.46	6.01
Total	390	7.59	0.56	7.37

One way Anova: $F=1.45$, $p=0.803$, $\Delta f=7$

According to the analysis of variance (ANOVA) and the obtained value of $F=1.45$ for the corresponding degree of freedom $\Delta f=7$, it is clear that there is no statistically significant difference in average grades during studies in relation to the choice of the teacher's roles in action research. There is a noticeable homogeneity of sub-samples regarding all primary options of the participants, the variance quotient Cv being significantly below 30.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Action research, which is growing rapidly, has gained a significant amount of attention in educational circles and has given rise to several research centers (University of Cambridge, University of East Anglia in Great Britain and University of Deakin in Australia) and journals (e.g. Educational Action Research). Action

research is considered to be an important means of strengthening the teachers' positions as well as a means of research. This type of research combines six different notions: the immediate cycle of problem identification, intervention planning, intervention application, results evaluation, reflective practice, political emancipation, critical theory, professional development and practitioners' research.

The research study presented here has shown that the statistical majority of participants believe that the most important role of the teacher in action research conducted in schools is that of the researcher (34.62%). The data processed show that the fewest participants opted for the role of the observer (6, i.e. – 1.54%), which reveals the teachers' awareness of the need to take on the role of the practitioner and researcher of educational practice. Regardless of the school environment, the role of the researcher was the primary choice of the participants, as is substantiated by the lack of statistically important differences between the participants working in different school environments. It is safe to conclude that regardless of the school environment in which teachers work, their opting for the role of the researcher in action research testifies to their engagement, motivation for changes, knowledge and the need for improvement of educational practice. The analysis has shown that there is a statistically significant difference between the study duration of individuals and their willingness to participate in action research. It is important to note that the teachers whose first choice was the role of the researcher had the shortest times of studying ($p<0.001$). The participants who primarily opted for the role of the observer, on the other hand, were those with the longest times of studying.

Action research can be introduced into Serbian schools only if it is conducted by trained

teachers and expert assistants. This can be done by appointing teachers or expert assistants as action research teachers/expert assistants. Using action research methodology more often in research projects during undergraduate studies can contribute to its affirmation. What can be concluded from the academic literature on action research so far is that action research cannot be learned from books (Marentič-Požarnik, 1993: 354). It is not merely a type of research, a scientific approach or philosophy, it actually provides creative responses for the challenges in the educational practice improvement. It is a flexible, situation-dependent methodology, which offers strictness, authenticity and a distribution of rights and responsibilities. A question that arises from this discussion on pros and cons of integrated action and research is whether it is the optimum way of ensuring the improving effect of research on the teaching practice or it is merely a recessive hybrid. One of the characteristic of action research is its endless dialectics. The essential value of this type of research is not in providing ready-made answers, but rather in generating new notions. Action research is not intended to change the whole world but only individuals, and precisely this is the advantage of this approach over other approaches which tend to attempt to change the world rather than individuals.

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